Terror fight redefines U.S. role in Colombia St. Petersburg Times

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Officials want to loosen restrictions on military assistance so items used in the war on drugs can be used to fight insurgents.

WASHINGTON - For years, the ghosts of Vietnam and El Salvador have kept Washington from joining the fight against Marxist rebels in Colombia.

It looks like that is about to change.

While U.S. troops probably won't be engaged in combat in Colombia any time soon, the White House and Congress are moving toward giving Bogota the green light to go after the rebels with U.S.-supplied helicopters, intelligence and training.

Secretary of State Colin Powell told a Senate subcommittee on Tuesday that the administration will "in the not too distant future" send Congress legislation that would loosen restrictions on U.S. military assistance to Colombia. Colombia can use U.S. helicopters and intelligence to fight narcotics production but not to fight the rebels that have been waging war on the government since 1964.

It's a line that has been often blurred in practice. And now, with the collapse of peace talks a few weeks ago and an escalation of the conflict, the White House is conducting "intense discussions" on how to respond, Powell said.

"They are not asking for U.S. troops - nor do I see U.S. troops going to Colombia," Powell said. "But we do believe we should help this democracy that is being threatened by narcotraffickers and terrorists."

Powell had similar words for a House subcommittee last week. "It may be necessary for us to give the government of Colombia additional support that is outside of the counternarcotics basket," he said, "in order that they are able to deal with this threat to their survival as a nation."

Adjusting the fight to counterinsurgency wouldn't take a big leap. U.S. Special Forces have trained three antidrug battalions in Colombia. American military advisers acknowledge that the training, which includes sniper training, can easily be shifted to fighting the guerrillas.

In a reflection of the changing strategy, the Bush administration is requesting $ 98-million in 2003 to help the Colombian army protect a vital oil pipeline against repeated sabotage. Overall, the White House is asking for $ 658-million in new aid for Colombia.

Congress seems willing to go along with the broader mission. Last week, the House passed a nonbinding resolution calling on President Bush to fashion legislation that would allow Washington to help Colombia fight the rebels. Sens. Bob Graham, D-Fla., Jesse Helms, R-N.C., and Mike DeWine, R-Ohio, sponsored the resolution in the Senate, which has yet to vote on it.

Graham, chairman of the Intelligence Committee, says Americans should start seeing the conflict as a regional security threat.

"Colombia is the oldest functioning democracy in South America and is a country which has been a good friend and ally of the United States," he said.

"Colombia is under assault by one of the most violent terrorist groups on the planet, and now is the time for this good neighbor to step forward and do what is right."

What has emboldened Washington are several factors: Sept. 11, the collapse of the peace talks, a sputtering drug war and increased rebel violence.

Before Sept. 11, the suggestion of helping Colombia fight the rebels would have been met with cries of Vietnam and El Salvador.

As the war on terrorism expands beyond Afghanistan, however, administration officials and lawmakers are clumping Colombia together with Georgia, Yemen and the Philippines.

During his appearance before the House subcommittee, Powell said, "It's terrorism that threatens stability in Colombia."

The State Department has designated the two main rebel groups in Colombia, the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia, or FARC, and the National Liberation Army, or ELN, as terrorist organizations. It also has also designated right wing paramilitary groups with links to the Colombian military as terrorists.

U.S. officials say FARC has about 17,000 rebels and ELN about 3,500 rebels. The paramilitaries, meanwhile, total about 15,000. While the Colombian military is 140,000 strong, the vast majority protect the nation's vulnerable infrastructure, including oil pipelines and power stations.

About 45,000 soldiers are deployed in the fight against the guerrillas.

Adam Isacson, a Colombia expert at the Center for International Policy, which opposes expanded U.S. military aid to Colombia, said the terrorist argument is playing well in Washington. "They're going to call this counterterrorism," Isacson said. "You're never going to hear counterinsurgency."

Rep. Janice Schakowsky, D-Ill., said Washington is making a mistake.

A longtime opponent of U.S. military aid to Colombia, Schakowsky said that the drug war has been a miserable failure and that backing the guerrilla war would yield similar results.

She pointed to a White House report released last week saying that coca production in Colombia increased last year. The assessment contradicted earlier estimates by the Colombian government.

Schakowsky said she had nothing good to say about U.S. efforts in Colombia. "I think what we found is we helped increase the violence in Colombia," she said.

What Washington should focus on, she said, is helping Colombia reach a peaceful settlement with the rebels. "We have to be more careful about our approach, or else we're just going to be part of the problem," she said.

By contrast, retired Gen. Barry McCaffrey, drug czar during the Clinton administration, said he applauded "the new thinking" in Washington.

He said U.S. law banning U.S. aid to Colombia from being used in the rebel war was based on "artificial fiction."

He cited this example: "You have a counternarcotics battalion in a fierce battle with (the rebels) in a coca field, and one town over, the rebels are torturing and killing the mayor of the town. And the counternarcotics battalion can't use the helicopter to get over to the village because of the restrictions.

"That made no sense at all," he said.

During his tenure as drug czar, McCaffrey said, the line between counternarcotics and counterinsurgency was blurred because of the role the rebels play in the drug trade.

The nation's rebel and right wing paramilitary organizations are said to rake in hundreds of millions of dollars a year in drug taxes.

What McCaffrey and others say Colombia needs to fight the rebels is better intelligence, better training and military equipment.

"The key to Colombia's armed forces is not making it bigger, but more professional, making sure it can move around the country and protect the people," McCaffrey said.

Myles Frechette, a former U.S. ambassador to Colombia, said what opened the door to the shift in policy was Colombian President Andres Pastrana's declaration that the peace talks had failed.

Washington, he said, had been waiting for his cue. "Pastrana said the emperor has no clothes," Frechette said. "And now everybody can say what everybody already knew."

Expansion of the U.S. military role in Colombia probably won't come until after Colombia elects a new president May 26 or in a runoff, Frechette said. Pastrana is not eligible to run again.

Frechette said he expects a high-level U.S. official to visit the new president and present him with a counterinsurgency plan.

The Bush administration will then make its argument to the American people.

"You talk about democracy, a democracy under fire," Frechette said. "You talk about the strategic importance to the United States.

"You sort of say, "There are people who are in trouble. Let's not kid ourselves. If we don't help them now, the cost of helping them later will be greater.'